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International IDEA’s upcoming Global State of Democracy 2022 report focuses on the role of social contracts in revitalizing democratic institutions. But what is a social contract and why is it important for democracy? What is a social contract? A social contract is an implicit agreement between the people and their government about what each side provides to the other. The terms of the agreement can vary widely. While notions of the social contract have historically tended to focus on things like security, employment opportunities and some form of social welfare to help address people’s needs over the course of their lives, social contracts can also include agreements on how communal relations are managed, women’s rights, and many other issues. In return for these rights, people pay taxes and consent to the authority of the state. Arguably, the government’s public legitimacy is rooted in the terms of the social contract. Certain terms of the social contract are implicit and difficult to definitively codify; they may be understood as social mores in a given society. In many cases, though, the agreements are given effect through constitutions and laws. For example, Canadians benefit from universal healthcare; their taxes ensure that they do not have to pay out-of-pocket for most healthcare services. In Costa Rica, the government made a conscious decision to spend heavily on education and healthcare instead of on the military. A long line of scholars and experts have studied social contracts, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant and John Locke. Beatrice Webb is also credited with advancing social contract theory. Some experts have traced the concept as far back as ancient Greece in the 5th century BC. In more recent times, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and LSE Director Minouche Shafik have shone a new spotlight on the issue. What does a social contract have to do with democracy? If we think of democracy as public control over decision-makers and decision-making and equality in the exercise of that control, it follows that social contracts are at the heart of democracy. Social contracts define the issues that decision-makers must work on, and they stipulate how people can hold those decision-makers accountable for upholding (or not) their ends of the deal. If people feel that the terms of the contract are not fair or are not being respected by the government, the latter risks losing legitimacy. Democracies are arguably better placed to keep social contracts updated, largely by virtue of the mechanisms in place to promote responsiveness and accountability. In addition to the fact that leaders can be voted out of office for failing to effectively deliver for their constituents, protests, petitions, and other avenues for communication allow people to let their leaders know what they must do to retain legitimacy. Why do we need to update social contracts? First, people’s needs are changing in response to a quickly evolving context. In addition to the myriad ways in which digitalization and the internet have impacted the way we live our daily lives, there are new expectations about more mobile lifestyles and things like remote working arrangements. People also want more responsive action to address the effects of climate change, the renewed threat of nuclear war and – more recently – a global cost of living crisis. Second, people may change their minds over time. The rise of more right-wing governments in Sweden and Italy suggest, for example, that publics may have more restrictive views than before about issues like immigration, especially as longstanding economic grievances remain unaddressed. In Indonesia, there is also increasing support for conservativism. Third, social contracts require renegotiation when governments fail to deliver as promised. When Sri Lanka’s Rajapaksa government defaulted on its debt, leaving the public without basic supplies, the public took to the streets and forced the president to resign. Subsequent discussion has widened to demand an overhaul of the social contract. What are some examples of social contract renewal? There are several contemporary examples of the renewal of social contracts. Around the world, youth are demanding an increased say in politics. In Belgium, for instance, the government lowered the voting age from 18 to 16 for all EU citizens living in the country who wish to cast ballots in the European Parliament elections, held every five years. The change was a direct response to the Conference for the Future of Europe, which included innovative citizens’ panels, empowered to make recommendations. In 2019, Malaysia also lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, partly in response to a youth-led campaign on this issue. Another example can be seen via the multiple examples of a push for stronger reproductive rights around the world. Examples from Finland, India, Sierra Leone, Colombia, and Malta – just to name a few - demonstrate how women (and men) expect their governments to do more to protect women’s autonomy over their own bodies. A final example noted here is in Chile, the site of one of the most inclusive constitutional drafting processes in the world. Although the text failed a public referendum, President Boric announced his support for a continuation of the process, something that 74 percent of Chileans also support. What happens when social contracts are not renewed? If people’s expressed needs are not addressed over a significant amount of time, it can risk the government legitimacy. A particularly striking example is in The Gambia, where Yahya Jammeh, who had ruled as president for 22 years, was defeated by Adama Barrow in a stunning 2016 victory. The new government has promised a raft of reforms, many of which promise to address people’s longstanding, unresolved grievances from the Jammeh era. People’s ability to seek justice for what happened in the past will be key to Barrow’s continued legitimacy and his government’s focus on these issues is a key example of how critical it is to be aware of the need to regularly renew social contracts. Lifestyles & Social Issues Sociology & Society Ask the Chatbot a Question What is the social contract in political philosophy? Who were the key philosophers associated with the social contract theory? How did Thomas Hobbes define the concept of the social contract? What was John Locke's view of the social contract and natural rights? How did Jean-Jacques Rousseau's interpretation of the social contract differ from Hobbes and Locke? Why is the social contract considered important in the development of modern political systems? What role does the social contract play in the relationship between individuals and the state? How does the social contract address the issue of authority and legitimacy in governance? In what way has the social contract theory influenced contemporary political thought and systems? What are some criticisms and limitations of the social contract theory in today's society? social contract, in political philosophy, an actual or hypothetical compact, or agreement, between the ruled or between the ruled and their rulers, defining the rights and duties of each. In primeval times, according to the theory, individuals were born into an anarchic state of nature, which was happy or unhappy according to the particular version of the theory. They then, by exercising natural reason, formed a society (and a government) by means of a social contract.Although similar ideas can be traced to the Greek Sophists, social-contract theories had their greatest currency in the 17th and 18th centuries and are associated with the English philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. What distinguished these theories of political obligation from other doctrines of the period was their attempt to justify and delimit political authority on the grounds of individual self-interest and rational consent. By comparing the advantages of organized government with the disadvantages of the state of nature, they showed why and under what conditions government is useful and ought therefore to be accepted by all reasonable people as a voluntary obligation. These conclusions were then reduced to the form of a social contract, from which it was supposed that all the essential rights and duties of citizens could be logically deduced.Theories of the social contract differed according to their purpose: some were designed to justify the power of the sovereign, while others were intended to safeguard the individual from oppression by a sovereign who was all too powerful. According to Hobbes (Leviathan, 1651), the state of nature was one in which there were no enforceable criteria of right and wrong. People took for themselves all that they could, and human life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” The state of nature was therefore a state of war, which could be ended only if individuals agreed (in a social contract) to give their liberty into the hands of a sovereign, on the sole condition that their lives were safeguarded by sovereign power. For Hobbes the authority of the sovereign is absolute, in the sense that no authority is above the sovereign, whose will is law. That, however, does not mean that the power of the sovereign is all-encompassing: subjects remain free to act as they please in cases in which the sovereign is silent (in other words, when the law does not address the action concerned). The social contract allows individuals to leave the state of nature and enter civil society, but the former remains a threat and returns as soon as governmental power collapses. Because the power of Leviathan (the political state) is uncontested, however, its collapse is very unlikely and occurs only when it is no longer able to protect its subjects. John LockeThe philosopher John Locke, oil on canvas by Herman Verelst, 1689; in the National Portrait Gallery, London.Locke (in the second of the Two Treatises of Government, 1690) differed from Hobbes insofar as he conceived of the state of nature not as a condition of complete license but rather as a state in which humans, though free, equal, and independent, are obliged under the law of nature to respect each other’s rights to life, liberty, and property. Individuals nevertheless agree to form a commonwealth (and thereby to leave the state of nature) in order to institute an impartial power capable of arbitrating disputes and redressing injuries. Accordingly, Locke held that the obligation to obey civil government under the social contract was conditional upon the protection of the natural rights of each person, including the right to private property. Sovereigns who violated these terms could be justifiably overthrown. Locke thus stated one of the fundamental principles of political liberalism: that there can be no subjection to power without consent—though once political society has been founded, citizens are obligated to accept the decisions of a majority of their number. Such decisions are made on behalf of the majority by the legislature, though the ultimate power of choosing the legislature rests with the people; and even the powers of the legislature are not absolute, because the law of nature remains as a permanent standard and as a principle of protection against arbitrary authority. Social contract theory is a philosophical theory that believes societies can only achieve stability and civility based upon an implied or explicit social contract. A social contract is an agreement among individuals within a social group to abide by certain rules and laws for mutual safety and defence. In its modern form, the idea was reintroduced by Thomas Hobbes and further developed by John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant. After Kant, the concept fell out of popularity among philosophers until it was brought back by John Rawls. The basic concept is that the consent of people within a society to be subject to rules and laws gives those rules and laws legitimacy (D’Agostino et al., 2021). According to social contract theory, individuals that live in a given community have explicitly or tacitly consented to surrender at least some of their freedoms and submit to the ruling authority in exchange for their protection and the maintenance of the social order (Castiglione, 2015). The social contract is a concept in moral and political philosophy the most famous forms of which come from the Age of Enlightenment. It usually concerns the legitimacy of the state’s authority over the individuals it governs (Gough, 1938). During the 17th and 18th centuries, several notable thinkers explored the ideas of the social contract and natural rights. The theory takes its name from Rousseau’s 1762 book, The Social Contract (French: Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique). These philosophers argued that humans on an individual level are free to do whatever they want. However, freedom leads to chaos and insecurity for both the individual and society. Hobbes called this the ‘state of nature.’ To escape the state of nature, individuals within a social group agree to give up their right to do whatever they want, and instead submit an authority. In exchange, they get order and security. Plato’s Republic is the first known text to discuss a concept resembling a social contract. In this text, Glaucon, one of Socrates’ interlocutors, tells a hypothetical story of how the social contract originated (The Republic, Book II). According to Glaucon, individuals used to live in fear of one another. To allay their fear, they sought to protect themselves by amassing power. However, they later realized that this life of endless power struggle was unsustainable as it caused endless conflict. As a solution, these individuals in Glaucon’s story came together and agreed to establish a “social contract.” Through this contract, they gave up some of their power and wealth to an established authority figure in exchange for mutual protection. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) was the first philosopher who saw justice as arising from a social contract instead of nature. He argued that “there never was such a thing as absolute justice, but only agreements made in mutual dealings among men in whatever places at various times providing against the infliction or suffering of harm” (Principal Doctrines, §33). The first modern thinker to articulate a comprehensive theory of the social contract was the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1651/2009). According to Hobbes, individuals living in the state of nature were “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Their short-sightedness and self-interest meant that they could not achieve self-betterment. Hobbes argued that society truly began when humans sought to escape from a state of endless conflict and agreed to a social contract. Early humans in the state of nature came together and surrendered some of their individual rights in exchange for mutual security. A society was established and a sovereign entity emerged. John Locke’s (1689/1821) understanding of the social contract shared some similarities with Hobbes’ but also had some notable differences. Like Hobbes, John Locke asserted that early humans must have come together as a society to overcome the ‘state of nature.’ However, according to Locke, people living in the state of nature were still bound by law. He called this the Law of Nature. According to this law, man has the “power … to preserve his property; that is, his life, liberty and estate against the injuries and attempts of other men” (Locke, 1689/1821). These natural rights, however, were under threat because they had no protection from a government. They had no recourse if their rights were violated. As a result, they lived in fear. Therefore, people came together to agree to form a state that would provide a neutral judge who would protect citizens. The social contract theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau differs significantly from the previous examples. Rousseau has a more collectivist approach according to which the foundations of society rest on the sovereign “general will.” In simple terms, the general will is the collective will of all citizens, as opposed to their individual interests. Rousseau believed that legitimacy comes only from the general will. The social contract, according to Rousseau, can be summarized as follows: “Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole” (Rousseau, 1762/1997). Immanuel Kant, another Enlightenment philosopher, outlined his understanding of the social contract in “The Metaphysics of Morals” (1797/1999). Like his compatriots, Kant saw the social contract as a set of rules for members of a state that delivers mutual benefit in the form of protection and security. However, Kant did not believe consent to be essential for the social contract to exist. Indeed, all of us who live today were born into a social contract that we were not party in creating. While the above philosophers all proposed that the social contract required ceding individual sovereignty to others, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon proposed a version that does not. Proudhon believed that the social contract was not an agreement between an individual and a state. Rather, it is a contract among sovereign individuals who agree not to harm, coerce, or control each other (Proudhon, 2007). Rawls (1999), building on the work of Immanuel Kant, proposed what’s called a contractarian approach to the social contract. In this approach, Rawls put forward the following thought experiment. Imagine if you were asked, before you were born, what principles of justice and social organization should exist. Because you’re not born yet, you don’t know what your gender, race, income, wealth, etc. will be. He called this the “original position.” From the original position, people would set aside their preferences behind a “veil of ignorance” and agree to a set of common principles of justice and organization—in other words, a social contract. David Gauthier (1987) posits that cooperation between two independent and self-interested individuals is possible, particularly when it comes to exploring morality and politics. In his version of the social contract, elements such as trust, rationality, and self-interest encourage each party to be truthful and discourage them from violating the rules. Philip Pettit, in his book “Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government” (1999), argues for an update to the conventional idea that the social contract is based on the consent of the governed. Explicit consent, according to Pettit, does not work because consent can be manufactured. Instead, he simply believes that the legitimacy of the social contract exists because there has not yet been an effective rebellion against it. See More Social Contract Examples Here Social contract theory is critiqued on the grounds that it is a theory that tends to conceptualize the “liberal individual” at the heart of the theory as a white male. This critique tends to come from feminist and critical race scholars. The feminist critique holds that Western liberal democratic social contracts have been developed with liberalism afforded primarily to men, for whom constitutions, laws, and contracts are constructed. For example, Carole Pateman (1988) argues that most social contracts have the effect of governing men’s domination over women. This codifies an overtly patriarchal and misogynistic cultural ideal into law. Her examples focus on marriage and surrogate motherhood, where she argues the social contract is designed to position women as subject to and dependant upon men. Thus, the social contract is a tool for the dominance of men in society. Similarly, the “liberal individual” conceptualized by a society with a social contract tends to see that individual in economic terms – the ‘economic man’. We see this, for example, in laws that gave men the right to property ownership, and upholds men as the powerful entities in legal and economic institutions. A race-conscious critique holds similar arguments, but looks at how the ‘liberal individual’ or ‘economic man’ envisaged by the social contract is decidedly white. No better example of this was in the USA, where a constitution built on the idea of a social contract nonetheless allowed white men ownership over Black people. Charles Mills (1997), for example, who was inspired by Pateman’s feminist critique, argued that the social contract is in fact a ‘racial contract’. This racial contract, Mills argues, justifies the exploitation of people, lands, and resources of other races. We continue to see this, for example, in debates over Indigenous land ownership in Canada and Australia, where land ownership under the social contract belongs to the ‘crown’ (i.e. white colonizers), whereas from the Indigenous perspective, this land is sovereign and unceded Indigenous land. The race contract fails to acknowledge this. A third critique comes from a care ethics perspective, which holds that the social contract sees civilization as an exchange of mutual benefit, which fails a moral duty to one another. The care ethics perspective holds that the social contract fails the poor and needy who are worthy of economic and physical protections regardless of their claim to money or power. In other words, our interdependence should be more than just of mutual benefit; rather, some of us should expend our time, energy, and economic resources for the care of others, without an expected reciprocal deed. Social contract theory posits that individuals, tacitly or explicitly, agree to abide by certain rules and laws of society. They do so because the alternative is far less appealing. As the examples above show, different philosophers have different conceptions of the social contract. The theory continues to be debated and discussed in contemporary political and moral philosophy, and it can be used to justify both democratic and authoritarian rule. Castiglione, D. (2015). Introduction the Logic of Social Cooperation for Mutual Advantage – The Democratic Contract. Political Studies Review, 13(2), 161–175. D’Agostino, F., Gaus, G., & Thrasher, J. (2021). Contemporary Approaches to the Social Contract. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2021). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Epicurus—Principal Doctrines. (n.d.). Retrieved January 14, 2023, from Gauthier, D. (1987). Morals by Agreement. Clarendon Press. Gough, J. (1938). The Social Contract: A Critical Study of its Development. Philosophical Review, 47(n/a), 331. Hobbes, T. (2009). Leviathan: The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civill. The Floating Press. (Original work published 1651) Kant, I. (1999). Metaphysical Elements of Justice (J. 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For Rousseau's 1762 treatise on the concept, see The Social Contract. For other uses, see Social Contract (disambiguation). The original cover of Thomas Hobbes's work Leviathan (1651), in which he discusses the concept of the social contract theory Part of the Politics seriesRepublicanism Concepts Anti-monarchism Anti-corruption Civic virtue Civil society Consent of the governed Democracy Democratization Liberty as non-domination Mixed government Political representation Popular sovereignty Public participation Republic Res publica Rule of law Self-governance Separation of powers Social contract Social equality Schools Classical Federal Kemalism Khomeinism Modern Nasserism Neo-republicanism Venizelism Types Autonomous Capitalist Christian Democratic Federal Imperial Islamic Maritime Parliamentary Peasant People's Revolutionary Secular Sister Soviet Philosophers Arendt Baggini Bello Bentham Bodin Cattaneo Chappell Cicero Condorcet Crick Franklin Harrington Honderich Jefferson Kant Locke Machiavelli Madison Mazzini Mill Montesquieu Paine Pettit Polybius Rousseau Sandel Sidney Sunstein Tocqueville Warburton Wollstonecraft Politicians Adams (Gerry) Adams (John) Atatürk Azaña Bartley Benn Bennett Bolívar Chapman Clark (Katy) Clarke (Tom) Connolly Cromwell Davidson Drakeford Etherington Fabiani Ferguson Flynn Gambetta Garibaldi de Gaulle Grévy Griffith Griffiths Harvie Hatton Hébert Hopkins Huppert Iorwerth Jackson Jay Jefferson Jones (Elin) Jones (Lynne) Juárez Kane Khomeini La Malfa Lenin Lewis Lincoln Lucas Mackay Mackenzie Madison Magid Mannin McDonnell McKechin Mullin Nandy Naysmith Nehru Pound Prescott Ritchie Robespierre Sayed Skates Skinner Slater Slaughter Smith Spadolini Sun Taverne Venizelos Wilson Wood Theoretical works Republic (c. 375 BC) De re publica (54–51 BC) Discourses on Livy (1531) The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates (1649) The Commonwealth of Oceana (1656) Discourses Concerning Government (1698) The Spirit of Law (1748) Discourse on Inequality (1755) The Social Contract (1762) The Federalist Papers (1787–1788) Rights of Man (1791) Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch (1794) Democracy in America (1835–1840) On Revolution (1963) History Roman Republic Gaṇasaṅgha Classical Athens Republic of Venice Republic of Genoa Republic of Florence Dutch Republic American Revolution French Revolution Spanish American wars of independence Trienio Liberal French Revolution of 1848 5 October 1910 revolution Chinese Revolution Russian Revolution German Revolution of 1918–1919 Turkish War of Independence Mongolian Revolution of 1921 11 September 1922 Revolution 1935 Greek coup d'état attempt Spanish Civil War 1946 Italian institutional referendum 1952 Egyptian revolution 14 July Revolution North Yemen civil war Zanzibar Revolution 1969 Libyan coup d'état 1970 Cambodian coup d'état Metapolitefsi Iranian revolution 1987 Fijian coups d'état Nepalese Civil War Barbadian Republic Proclamation National variants Antigua and Barbuda Australia Bahamas Barbados Canada Ireland Jamaica Japan Morocco Netherlands New Zealand Norway Spain Sweden United Kingdom Scotland Wales United States Related topics Classical radicalism Common good Communitarianism Criticism of monarchy Egalitarianism The Emperor's New Clothes Jacobinism Liberalism List of republics Monarchism Peasant republic Primus inter pares Republic without republicans Republican empire Republican Party Politics portalvte In moral and political philosophy, the social contract is an idea, theory, or model that usually, although not always, concerns the legitimacy of the authority of the state over the individual.[1] Conceptualized in the Age of Enlightenment, it is a core concept of constitutionalism, while not necessarily convened and written down in a constituent assembly and constitution. Social contract arguments typically are that individuals have consented, either explicitly or tacitly, to surrender some of their freedoms and submit to the authority (of the ruler, or to the decision of a majority) in exchange for protection of their remaining rights or maintenance of the social order.[2][3] The relation between natural and legal rights is often a topic of social contract theory. The term takes its name from The Social Contract (French: Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique), a 1762 book by Jean-Jacques Rousseau that discussed this concept. Although the antecedents of social contract theory are found in antiquity, in Greek and Stoic philosophy and Roman and Canon Law, the heyday of the social contract was the mid-17th to early 19th centuries, when it emerged as the leading doctrine of political legitimacy. The starting point for most social contract theories is an examination of the human condition absent any political order (termed the "state of nature" by Thomas Hobbes).[4] In this condition, individuals' actions are bound only by their personal power and conscience, assuming that 'nature' precludes mutually beneficial social relationships. From this shared starting point, social contract theorists seek to demonstrate why rational individuals would voluntarily consent to give up their natural freedom to obtain the benefits of political order. Prominent 17th- and 18th-century theorists of the social contract and natural rights included Hugo de Groot (1625), Thomas Hobbes (1651), Samuel von Pufendorf (1673), John Locke (1689), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) and Immanuel Kant (1797), each approaching the concept of political authority differently. Grotius posited that individual humans had natural rights. Thomas Hobbes famously said that in a "state of nature", human life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". In the absence of political order and law, everyone would have unlimited natural freedoms, including the "right to all things" and thus the freedom to plunder, rape and murder; there would be an endless "war of all against all" (bellum omnium contra omnes). To avoid this, free men contract with each other to establish political community (civil society) through a social contract in which they all gain security in return for subjecting themselves to an absolute sovereign, one man or an assembly of men. Though the sovereign's edicts may well be arbitrary and tyrannical, Hobbes saw absolute government as the only alternative to the terrifying anarchy of a state of nature. Hobbes asserted that humans consent to abdicate their rights in favor of the absolute authority of government (whether monarchical or parliamentary). Alternatively, Locke and Rousseau argued that we gain civil rights in return for accepting the obligation to respect and defend the rights of others, giving up some freedoms to do so. The central assertion that social contract theory approaches is that law and political order are not natural, but human creations. The social contract and the political order it creates are simply the means towards an end—the benefit of the individuals involved—and legitimate only to the extent that they fulfill their part of the agreement. Hobbes argued that government is not a party to the original contract and citizens are not obligated to submit to the government when it is too weak to act effectively to suppress factionalism and civil unrest. There is a general form of social contract theories, which is: I chooses R in M and this gives I* reason to endorse and comply with R in the real world insofar as the reasons I has for choosing R in M are (or can be) shared by I*.[5]With M being the deliberative setting; R rules, principles or institutions; I the (hypothetical) people in original position or state of nature making the social contract; and I* being the individuals in the real world following the social contract.[5] Social contract formulations are preserved in many of the world's oldest records.[6] The Indian Buddhist text of the second century BC Mahāvastu recounts the legend of Mahasammata. The story goes as follows: In the early days of the cosmic cycle mankind lived on an immaterial plane, dancing on air in a sort of fairyland, where there was no need of food or clothing, and no private property, family, government or laws. Then gradually the process of cosmic decay began its work, and mankind became earthbound, and felt the need of food and shelter. As men lost their primeval glory, distinctions of class arose, and they entered into agreements with one another, accepting the institution of private property and the family. With this theft, murder, adultery, and other crime began, and so the people met together and decided to appoint one man from among them to maintain order in return for a share of the produce of their fields and herds. He was called "the Great Chosen One" (Mahasammata), and he received the title of raja because he pleased the people.[7] In his rock edicts, the Indian Buddhist king Asoka was said to have argued for a broad and far-reaching social contract.[citation needed] The Buddhist vinaya also reflects social contracts expected of the monks; one such instance is when the people of a certain town complained about monks felling saka trees, the Buddha tells his monks that they must stop and give way to social norms.[citation needed] Epicurus in the fourth century BC seemed to have had a strong sense of social contract, with justice and law being rooted in mutual agreement and advantage, as evidenced by these lines, among others, from his Principal Doctrines (see also Epicurean ethics): 31. Natural justice is a pledge of reciprocal benefit, to prevent one man from harming or being harmed by another. 32. Those animals which are incapable of making binding agreements with one another not to inflict nor suffer harm are without either justice or injustice; and likewise for those peoples who either could not or would not form binding agreements not to inflict nor suffer harm. 33. There never was such a thing as absolute justice, but only agreements made in mutual dealings among men in whatever places at various times providing against the infliction or suffering of harm.[8] The concept of the social contract was originally posed by Glaucon, as described by Plato in The Republic, Book II. They say that to do injustice is, by nature, good; to suffer injustice, evil; but that the evil is greater than the good. And so when men have both done and suffered injustice and have had experience of both, not being able to avoid the one and obtain the other, they think that they had better agree among themselves to have neither; hence there arise laws and mutual covenants; and that which is ordained by law is termed by them lawful and just. This they affirm to be the origin and nature of justice;—it is a mean or compromise, between the best of all, which is to do injustice and not be punished, and the worst of all, which is to suffer injustice without the power of retaliation; and justice, being at a middle point between the two, is tolerated not as a good, but as the lesser evil, and honoured by reason of the inability of men to do injustice. For no man who is worthy to be called a man would ever submit to such an agreement if he were able to resist; he would be mad if he did. Such is the received account, Socrates, of the nature and origin of justice.[9] The social contract theory also appears in Crito, another dialogue from Plato. Over time, the social contract theory became more widespread after Epicurus (341–270 BC), the first philosopher who saw justice as a social contract, and not as existing in Nature due to divine intervention (see below and also Epicurean ethics), decided to bring the theory to the forefront of his society. As time went on, philosophers of traditional political and social thought, such as Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau put forward their opinions on social contract, which then caused the topic to become much more mainstream.[citation needed] Quentin Skinner has argued that several critical modern innovations in contract theory are found in the writings from French Calvinists and Huguenots, whose work in turn was invoked by writers in the Low Countries who objected to their subjection to Spain and, later still, by Catholics in England.[10] Francisco Suárez (1548–1617), from the School of Salamanca, might be considered an early theorist of the social contract, theorizing natural law in an attempt to limit the divine right of absolute monarchy. All of these groups were led to articulate notions of popular sovereignty by means of a social covenant or contract, and all of these arguments began with proto-"state of nature" arguments, to the effect that the basis of politics is that everyone is by nature free of subjection to any government. These arguments, however, relied on a corporatist theory found in Roman law, according to which "a populus" can exist as a distinct legal entity. Thus, these arguments held that a group of people can join a government because it has the capacity to exercise a single will and make decisions with a single voice in the absence of sovereign authority—a notion rejected by Hobbes and later contract theorists. Main article: Leviathan (Hobbes book) The first modern philosopher to articulate a detailed contract theory was Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). According to Hobbes, the lives of individuals in the state of nature were "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short", a state in which self-interest and the absence of rights and contracts prevented the "social", or society. Life was "anarchic" (without leadership or the concept of sovereignty). Individuals in the state of nature were apolitical and asocial. This state of nature is followed by the social contract. The social contract was seen as an "occurrence" during which individuals came together and ceded some of their individual rights so that others would cede theirs.[11] This resulted in the establishment of the state, a sovereign entity like the individuals now under its rule used to be, which would create laws to regulate social interactions. Human life was thus no longer "a war of all against all". The state system, which grew out of the social contract, was, however, also anarchic (without leadership). Just as the individuals in the state of nature had been sovereigns and thus guided by self-interest and the absence of rights, so states now acted in their self-interest in competition with each other. Just like the state of nature, states were thus bound to be in conflict because there was no sovereign over and above the state (more powerful) capable of imposing some system such as social-contract laws on everyone by force. Indeed, Hobbes' work helped to serve as a basis for the realism theories of international relations, advanced by E. H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau. Hobbes wrote in Leviathan that humans ("we") need the "terrour of some Power" otherwise humans will not heed the law of reciprocity, "(in summe) doing to others, as wee would be done to".[12] John Locke's conception of the social contract differed from Hobbes' in several fundamental ways, retaining only the central notion that individuals in a state of nature would willingly come together to form a state. Locke believed that individuals in a state of nature would be bound morally, by the Law of Nature, in which man has the "power... to preserve his property; that is, his life, liberty and estate against the injuries and attempts of other men". Without government to defend them against those seeking to injure or enslave them, Locke further believed people would have no security in their rights and would live in fear. Individuals, to Locke, would only agree to form a state that would provide, in part, a "neutral judge", acting to protect the lives, liberty, and property of those who lived within it.[13][14] While Hobbes argued for near-absolute authority, Locke argued for inviolate freedom under law in his Second Treatise of Government. Locke argued that a government's legitimacy comes from the citizens' delegation to the government of their absolute right of violence (reserving the inalienable right of self-defense or "self-preservation"), along with elements of other rights (e.g. property will be liable to taxation) as necessary to achieve the goal of security through granting the state a monopoly of violence, whereby the government, as an impartial judge, may use the collective force of the populace to administer and enforce the law, rather than each man acting as his own judge, jury, and executioner—the condition in the state of nature.[citation needed] Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), in his influential 1762 treatise The Social Contract, outlined a different version of social-contract theory, as the foundations of society based on the sovereignty of the "general will". Rousseau's political theory differs in important ways from that of Locke and Hobbes. Rousseau's collectivist conception is most evident in his development of the "luminous conception" (which he credited to Denis Diderot) of the "general will". Summarised, the "general will" is the power of all the citizens' collective interest—not to be confused with their individual interests. Although Rousseau wrote that the British were perhaps at the time the freest people on earth, he did not approve of their representative government, nor any form of representative government. Rousseau believed that society was only legitimate when the sovereign (i.e. the "general will") were the sole legislators. He also stated that the individual must accept "the total alienation to the whole community of each associate with all his rights".[15] In short, Rousseau meant that in order for the social contract to work, individuals must forfeit their rights to the whole so that such conditions were "equal for all".[16][The social contract] can be reduced to the following terms: Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.[17] Rousseau's striking phrase that man must "be forced to be free"[18] should be understood[according to whom?] this way: since the indivisible and inalienable popular sovereignty decides what is good for the whole, if an individual rejects this "civil liberty"[19] in place of "natural liberty"[19] and self interest, disobeying the law, he will be forced to listen to what was decided when the people acted as a collective (as citizens). Thus the law, inasmuch as it is created by the people acting as a body, is not a limitation of individual freedom, but rather its expression. The individual, as a citizen, explicitly agreed to be constrained if, as a private individual, he did not respect his own will as formulated in the general will. Because laws represent the restraint of "natural liberty",[19] they represent the leap made from humans in the state of nature into civil society. In this sense, the law is a civilizing force. Therefore, Rousseau believed that the laws that govern a people help to mould their character. Rousseau also analyses the social contract in terms of risk management,[20] thus suggesting the origins of the state as a form of mutual insurance. While Rousseau's social contract is based on popular sovereignty and not on individual sovereignty, there are other theories espoused by individualists, libertarians, and anarchists that do not involve agreeing to anything more than negative rights and creates only a limited state, if any. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865) advocated a conception of social contract that did not involve an individual surrendering sovereignty to others. According to him, the social contract was not between individuals and the state, but rather among individuals who refrain from coercing or governing each other, each one maintaining complete sovereignty upon him- or herself: What really is the Social Contract? An agreement of the citizen with the government? No, that would mean but the continuation of [Rousseau's] idea. The social contract is an agreement of man with man; an agreement from which must result what we call society. In this, the notion of commutative justice, first brought forward by the primitive fact of exchange, ... is substituted for that of distributive justice ... Translating these words, contract, commutative justice, which are the language of the law, into the language of business, and you have commerce, that is to say, in its highest significance, the act by which man and man declare themselves essentially producers, and abdicate all pretension to govern each other.—Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century (1851) Building on the work of Immanuel Kant with its presumption of limits on the state,[21] John Rawls (1921–2002), in A Theory of Justice (1971), proposed a contractarian approach whereby rational people in a hypothetical "original position" would set aside their individual preferences and capacities under a "veil of ignorance" and agree to certain general principles of justice and legal organization. This idea is also used as a game-theoretical formalization of the notion of fairness. Main article: Contractarian ethics David Gauthier's "neo-Hobbesian" theory argues that cooperation between two independent and self-interested parties is indeed possible, especially when it comes to understanding morality and politics.[22] Gauthier notably points out the advantages of cooperation between two parties when it comes to the challenge of the prisoner's dilemma. He proposes that, if two parties were to stick to the original agreed-upon arrangement and morals outlined by the contract, they would both experience an optimal result.[22][23] In his model for the social contract, factors including trust, rationality, and self-interest keep each party honest and dissuade them from breaking the rules.[22][23] Philip Pettit (b. 1945) has argued, in Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government (1997), that the theory of social contract, classically based on the consent of the governed, should be modified. Instead of arguing for explicit consent, which can always be manufactured, Pettit argues that the absence of an effective rebellion against it is a contract's only legitimacy. Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that societal laws are upheld up the collective will of the citizens whom they represent. Thus, in obeying laws, the citizen "remains free." Within elections, the will of the establishment is the will of the collective. Barring corruption, the legitimacy of the democractic government is absolute.[24] In every real democracy, magistracy is not an advantage, but a burdensome charge which cannot justly be imposed on one individual rather than another. The law alone can lay the charge on him on whom the lot falls. For, the conditions being then the same for all, and the choice not depending on any human will, there is no particular application to alter the universality of the law. —Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right. Book IV[25] According to other social contract theorists, when the government fails to secure their natural rights (Locke) or satisfy the best interests of society, citizens can withdraw their obligation to obey or change the leadership through elections or other means including, when necessary, violence. Locke believed that natural rights were inalienable, and therefore the rule of God superseded government authority, while Rousseau believed that democracy (majority-rule) was the best way to ensure welfare while maintaining individual freedom under the rule of law. The Lockean concept of the social contract was invoked in the United States Declaration of Independence.[26] In court, the social contract is used to diagnose mental health, with the ultimate aim of delivering a fair sentence.[27] Judge John Geoffrey Jones called it "an aspect of the instinct for self-preservation." He saw the committer of bad deeds as the impervious person: that "rare person whose intuition is stunted and who misses out on instruction grows up uninhibited, so continues bad deeds." Jones argued that the legitimancy of the judiciary is not absolute. Rather than the court, it is the psychiatrist's job to diagnose mental health.[28]My own present, unresolved thoughts are that 'evil' is within the realm of theologians and moral philosophers. Doctors, judges and lawyers would do well to concern themselves with bad deeds and bad health, that is deeds, which society has determined as criminal. If the perpetrators of bad deeds are not sick, they should be punished according to law. If they are sick, they should be treated. —John Geoffrey Jones, Psychopaths: An Introduction[29] An early critic of social contract theory was Rousseau's friend, the philosopher David Hume, who in 1742 published an essay "Of Civil Liberty". The second part of this essay, entitled "Of the Original Contract",[30] stresses that the concept of a "social contract" is a convenient fiction: As no party, in the present age can well support itself without a philosophical or speculative system of principles annexed to its political or practical one; we accordingly find that each of the factions into which this nation is divided has reared up a fabric of the former kind, in order to protect and cover that scheme of actions which it pursues. ... The one party [defenders of the absolute and divine right of kings, or Tories], by tracing up government to the DEITY, endeavor to render it so sacred and inviolate that it must be little less than sacrilege, however tyrannical it may become, to touch or invade it in the smallest article. The other party [the Whigs, or believers in constitutional monarchy], by founding government altogether on the consent of the PEOPLE suppose that there is a kind of original contract by which the subjects have tacitly reserved the power of resisting their sovereign, whenever they find themselves aggrieved by that authority with which they have for certain purposes voluntarily entrusted him. —David Hume, "On Civil Liberty" [II.XII.1][30] Hume argued that consent of the governed was the ideal foundation on which a government should rest, but that it had not actually occurred this way in general. My intention here is not to exclude the consent of the people from being one just foundation of government where it has place. It is surely the best and most sacred of any. I only contend that it has very seldom had place in any degree and never almost in its full extent. And that therefore some other foundation of government must also be admitted. —Ibid II.XII.20 Legal scholar Randy Barnett has argued[31] that, while presence in the territory of a society may be necessary for consent, this does not constitute consent to all rules the society might make regardless of their content. A second condition of consent is that the rules be consistent with underlying principles of justice and the protection of natural and social rights, and have procedures for effective protection of those rights (or liberties). This has also been discussed by O. A. Brownson,[32] who argued that, in a sense, three "constitut

Resources in other libraries "The Social Contract". In Our Time (7 Feb 2008). BBC Radio Program. Melvyn Bragg, moderator; with Melissa Lane, Cambridge University; Susan James, University of London; Karen O'Brien, University of Warwick. "Game Theory". In Our Time (May 10, 2012). BBC Radio Program. Melvin Bragg, moderator, with Ian Stewart, Emeritus, University of Warwick, Andrew Colman, University of Leicester, and Richard Bradley, London School of Economics. Discussion of game theory that touches on relation of game theory to the Social Contract. Foisneau, Luc. "Governing a Republic: Rousseau's General Will and the Problem of Government". Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts 2, no. 1 (December 15, 2010) Sigmund, Paul E. "Natural Law, Consent, and Equality: William of Ockham to Richard Hooker". Published on website Natural Law, Natural Rights, and American Constitutionalism. A We the People project of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Cudd, Ann. "Contractarianism". In Zalta, Edward N. (ed.). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. D'Agostino, Fred. "Contemporary Approaches to the Social Contract". In Zalta, Edward N. (ed.). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. "Social contract". Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Jan Narveson. "The Contractarian Theory of Morals:FAQ". On website Against Politics: Anarchy Naturalized. A satirical example of a social contract for the United States from the Libertarian Party. Parody. Social Contract: A Basic Contradiction in Western Liberal Democracy, Eric Engle. A critique of social contract theory as counter-factual myth. Portals: History Law Philosophy Politics Society Retrieved from " The social contract is a foundational concept in both political philosophy and sociology, rooted in the idea that individuals collectively agree to form a society and abide by its rules for mutual benefit. Although it originated in the works of philosophers who primarily dealt with political and ethical dimensions, the social contract has evolved into a broader sociological framework for understanding how social order is maintained and how individuals align their behavior with collective norms. By examining how and why people consent—either explicitly or implicitly—to social arrangements, we gain valuable insight into the formation of institutions, laws, and the expectations that shape everyday life.Undergraduate students of sociology often encounter the social contract in the context of structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. Yet, the social contract itself transcends any single theoretical perspective. It explains why individuals might be willing to give up certain freedoms in exchange for collective security, social stability, or other forms of communal advantage. In contemporary societies, these underlying agreements are rarely formalized. Instead, they are woven into the cultural and legal fabric, reflecting collective beliefs and historical pathways that have shaped our present-day norms.In practice, the social contract is far from uniform. Different cultures, periods in history, and social groups have unique understandings of communal obligations and individual rights. Nonetheless, the fundamental question remains: Why should individuals cooperate rather than exist in perpetual conflict? By exploring the evolution, principles, and critiques of the social contract, we can deepen our understanding of how social orders are crafted and how they persist.In the following sections, we will delve into the historical underpinnings of the social contract, explore its core tenets, examine variations in philosophical thought, and discuss how it applies to modern life. We will also consider some limitations and critiques, illuminating the tension between individual freedom and collective responsibility that is inherent in any social arrangement.The roots of social contract theory stretch back centuries and reflect the ongoing human struggle to reconcile individual autonomy with the need for communal cohesion. Early ideas resembling a social contract were found in classical antiquity, where Greek and Roman thinkers wrestled with questions of civic duty and the legitimacy of governance. However, the formal articulation of social contract theory is most commonly associated with early modern European thinkers who sought to ground legitimate authority in reason rather than divine decree or inheritance.Social instability, wars, and rebellions played a pivotal role in shaping the early conceptions of the social contract. In these periods of turmoil, philosophers looked for explanations and solutions that could unify communities. Instead of relying solely on tradition, they introduced the notion that societies could be justified through an agreement among free and equal individuals who decide to co-create institutions. This line of thinking marked a shift from hierarchical systems based on unquestioned authority to a more reciprocal relationship between the rulers and the ruled.While political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau each had unique approaches, they shared a central concern: How do we craft rules that ensure both personal security and a cohesive social fabric? Although Hobbes painted a dark view of human nature in the state of nature, Locke offered a more optimistic perspective, focusing on natural rights that governments must protect. Meanwhile, Rousseau emphasized popular sovereignty, arguing that legitimate authority resides in the general will of the people.Over time, these political ideas have expanded into broader sociological discourses. Sociologists study the social contract to understand how norms, laws, and institutions emerge from the interplay of individual actions and collective needs. In this sense, the historical underpinnings of social contract theory serve as the bedrock for analyzing contemporary social structures and the ways in which individuals comply with or resist established norms. The diverse intellectual heritage of the social contract sets the stage for ongoing debates about democracy, human rights, social justice, and the moral obligations we hold toward each other within societies.While there is no single version of the social contract, several common principles emerge:Voluntary Agreement (Implicit or Explicit): At the heart of the social contract is the idea that individuals come together of their own volition. Historically, it was believed that people explicitly consented to some form of governance. In modern sociological and political thought, this agreement is often seen as implicit, expressed through everyday participation in social life, respect for laws, or payment of taxes.Mutual Benefit: The contract is not one-sided. People agree to rules and structures that, in theory, offer mutual advantages, such as security, order, and access to public goods. Through this collective arrangement, individuals avoid the potential chaos that might arise if each person only pursued personal interests with no regard for others.Limitation of Individual Freedom: Under the social contract, individuals typically surrender certain freedoms in exchange for the protections and benefits provided by societal structures. These limitations can vary from the obligation to follow laws to the expectation that one should respect another's property rights.Reciprocal Responsibilities: An effective social contract implies that governance structures must uphold their side of the bargain, protecting individuals' fundamental interests and ensuring equitable treatment. Citizens, in turn, are expected to fulfill civic obligations such as adhering to legal codes, contributing to social institutions, or participating in civic life.Foundation for Legitimacy: The social contract serves as a moral and rational basis for the legitimacy of authority. If rulers fail to uphold their obligations—by neglecting public welfare, for example—they risk forfeiting the moral standing needed to govern effectively.By breaking down these core elements, sociologists can better explain how social order is constructed and maintained. Each tenet underscores the delicate balance between individual interests and collective requirements, inviting scrutiny of whether that balance remains fair, equitable, and responsive to changing social conditions.Though often grouped together, major theorists of the social contract diverge significantly in their views:Thomas Hobbes, writing in the midst of the English Civil War, posited that the state of nature—human existence without government—would be marked by constant fear and violence. Individuals, driven by self-preservation, would rationally choose to submit to an absolute authority, such as a sovereign, to maintain order. This harsh perspective underscores the degree to which stability and security might outweigh personal freedoms.John Locke offered a contrasting approach, contending that individuals in the state of nature possessed certain inalienable rights—such as life, liberty, and property. Governments formed under Locke's social contract are obligated to protect these rights; failure to do so justifies rebellion. This perspective underpins modern liberal democracies, emphasizing limited government and the importance of safeguarding individual liberties.Jean-Jacques Rousseau placed a strong emphasis on the 'general will,' a concept that transcends individual interests to focus on the collective good. Rousseau believed individuals could achieve true freedom by committing themselves to the common interest, as prescribed by the general will. His views prioritize direct participation and equality, influencing the development of popular sovereignty and social welfare ideals.In modern sociology, these classical positions merge with empirical research and emerging theories of social cooperation. Some scholars highlight how social contract-like principles appear in daily life, from group projects in educational settings to workplace dynamics where rules and norms are established for collective efficiency. Others critique the notion of contract by suggesting that not all individuals are equally positioned to consent, and that power disparities or cultural biases may distort any purported 'agreement.'Despite these differences, the unifying element across philosophical traditions is the recognition that societies require a degree of cooperation and order, built upon shared norms, values, or agreements that individuals recognize. Understanding these variations enriches sociological exploration by spotlighting how cultural, political, and historical contexts shape the nature of social contracts.